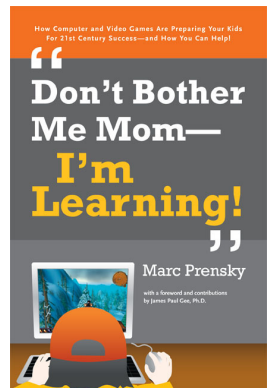


Prensky, Mark (2006). *“Don’t Bother Me Mom – I’m Learning”*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House.

In an age when we are constantly bombarded with information about the negative effects of the overuse of technology by young people, Mark Prensky has written a provocative book that claims that the opposite is true. Focusing specifically on the use of games and gaming, the author makes a strong case for claiming that technology is not only beneficial, but may actually reshape the brain to allow complex, higher-order thinking. Using a variety of written sources and experiential evidence, Prensky asserts that the changes made to a student’s brain by gaming and the use of technology make it almost impossible for them to do well in a traditional academic setting. He argues that schools must adapt and change their teaching methods to meet these new learning styles or they will be unable to teach these newly rewired students.



Mr. Prensky identifies his goals early in his book: First, to peak into the hidden world of gaming, and second, to understand the positive aspects of gaming. The first few chapters of the book seek to dispel the negative perception held by most parents that computer games are just a fun way to waste a great deal of time. The games played by today’s young people are much more



complex than those of their parents and required an entirely new set of mental skills to complete. The difference between the skill set used by young people and older people to play games is so pronounced that he has coined two terms to describe the differences: “digital native” for those who grew up using technology and “digital immigrant” for those who learned to use technology later in life. Mr. Prensky presents a variety of scientific evidence to show that long-term use of these interactive, multi-player games actually reshapes the brain and changes the way the player learns.

He further claims that the compelling nature of the learning and skills required in today’s games make traditional education and “drill and kill” educational games ineffective in teaching these new students. Dismissing parental fears about the violent nature of many of today’s games, Prensky describes the necessity of having parents participate in the gaming experience to act as a counterbalancing influence to the violence found in many games. As proof of his statements that violent games don’t increase violence in teens, he cites statistics that show that societal violence has diminished as teenage gaming has gone up.

As the reader moves deeper into the book, the information becomes more technical. There is a lengthy discussion of brain neuroplasticity and its effects on the learning capabilities of today’s gaming youth. Among the benefits gained through gaming are an increased attention span (for things the person likes to do) and a heightened ability to reflect on decisions and outcomes. Prensky cites a variety of testimonial evidence, including a surgeon who claims that their surgical ability is enhanced through gaming. As further evidence of the learning that can be achieved through gaming, the author discusses the use games and simulations in training new recruits for both the U.S. Army and the Marine Corps. The many ways digital immigrants learn and do things differently than younger digital natives are fully explored and discussed. The last portion of the book is essentially a testimonial by the author about the benefits of gaming with his children. He seems to believe that gaming is way for parents and children to share and grow together in ways that might not be possible otherwise.

Reading this book was like watching a James Bond movie: It's fun to watch and enjoy the technology applied in new and exciting ways, but if you stop to think about what is really happening you begin to see the fictitious nature of the story. The nature of the information in the book is telegraphed by the author's self-description in the Introduction as being "not a psychologist or professor by training."



His expressed goal for the book, also listed in the Introduction, is to "peek into the hidden world into which your kids disappear when they are playing computer games." It is obvious that this book has been written to bridge the gap between immigrant parents and their native, gaming-playing children. Prensky presents a very compelling story buoyed by testimonials from a variety of PhDs, scientists, surgeons, military

technologists, and game designers. Although a lot of the information in the book has an academic feel to it, we readily find that scientific evidence of any kind is missing from this story. One example is the surgeon who claims that he makes 40% fewer mistakes during surgery because he is an active gamer. How is it possible to measure mistakes you don't make? The author claims that as violence in games has gone up, the amount of violent crime in the United States has gone down. But he offers no evidence of a connection between gaming and crime reduction. Most scientific studies I have seen link the decrease in violent crime with an improvement in the economy. Perhaps there is less of a connection here than we think. The use of gaming as a training aid for the U.S. Army and Marine Corps would seem to be credible evidence until the reasons for its use are understood. The military has found that the reading

level of most of our recruits is so low that they cannot learn by reading a manual. Training methods were forced to change because of the low academic level of most recruits and budget cutbacks. New recruits use gaming to simulate combat simply because it's cheaper and easier to learn by trainees with low academic skills. The low-level reading skills have forced the military to teach traditional academic information through the use of books similar to "graphic comics."



This book is based on an interesting and compelling idea, but would be much more credible if the author's assertions were supported by scientific evidence and educational studies. It is a shame that the author doesn't use any of the innumerable scientific studies into brain-based learning and education that have been carried out over the last decade.

I think these studies provide a clearer picture into the future of education rather than the assertions in Mr. Prensky's book. Possibly the best use of this book is as a springboard for further discussion about the possible direction of future education and the role of technology in educating tomorrow's students. Educators must prepare their students to be a valuable part of today's society, and students who are high-level learners only for "things they like" are not going to be successful. It would be far better to use technology as part of a comprehensive educational plan that incorporates a variety of proven educational techniques to teach tomorrow's students. No one solution, such as gaming, will effectively educate our students.